

Approaches #2: The Silent Way Reflection Paper

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Date: 10/31/2014

The Silent Way Reflection Paper

My first encounter with the Silent Way (SW) left me with mixed feelings. From a student's perspective, the initial activity was creative and intellectually engaging—it sparked curiosity and required me to work independently, using *my own criteria for correction* without any teacher intervention. For the first time, I felt the learning experience truly belonged to me. I was actively making choices, reflecting on them, and taking responsibility for my own progress.

However, the second activity—the Color-Sound Chart—was quite confusing. This confusion stemmed from two main reasons. First, it demanded a kind of memorization that was difficult for me. My weakness as a learner has always been rote memorization, and even the visual aspect of the chart did not assist much with retaining the sounds. I questioned the pedagogical value of associating isolated sounds with colors, wondering if introducing sounds in isolation might hinder rather than help recognition.

Second, when I looked at the chart through the lens of a teacher, I struggled to understand its practical purpose. I wondered: *Why use a chart of disconnected sounds, especially with advanced learners? What does this have to do with meaningful language teaching? Isn't it a deviation from contextualized learning to something overly mechanical?*

With time, however, and through deeper engagement with the principles and practices of the Silent Way, my perception changed significantly. I came to appreciate its conceptual depth and pedagogical insight. I realized that “silence” in the Silent Way carries two layers of meaning.

The first layer is literal: it reflects the principle that “teaching is subordinate to learning.” The teacher’s role is not to dominate but to guide—to serve as a *technician* or *engineer* who shifts responsibility to learners. The teacher observes, anticipates, and supervises learning with deliberate restraint.

The second layer of silence is internal—it refers to what happens inside the learner’s mind. The learner becomes autonomous, deeply engaged in constructing understanding rather than receiving it passively. This autonomy fosters risk-taking and self-correction, transforming errors into opportunities for discovery. Through this approach, I learned what it means to truly *own* my learning.

The Silent Way also reshaped how I perceive my role as a teacher. Gattegno’s statement that “the teacher does not prepare a lesson plan but prepares herself” resonated strongly with me. It redefined preparation as an act of *awareness* rather than mere planning. To “prepare myself” means to think through the content as my students would—to anticipate their difficulties, predict their questions, and guide their next steps with intentional clarity. Teaching, then, becomes an act of empathy and precision.

In this way, the Silent Way promotes awareness on both sides: it empowers learners to take responsibility for their learning and urges teachers to think more deeply about what they teach and why. The result is a reciprocal process where teachers become students, and students become teachers—a dynamic exchange that enriches the classroom experience.

Finally, I recognized how closely the Silent Way aligns with **Constructivism**, a concept I encountered in my SLA course. A Silent Way teacher, much like a constructivist educator, sees

knowledge not as something to be transmitted but as something to be *constructed*. The activities in SW embody this philosophy—they encourage learners to build understanding through discovery and reflection rather than memorization or repetition.

Response

Dear Mohamed,

Thanks for this thoughtful reflection. It sounds like the charts may not be a tool that serves your particular teaching context. Instead, it sounds like you connected with many principles of the approach that you experienced first in the sorting card activity with Hugh. Connecting with the ability to develop inner criteria for correctness without the teacher is a powerful learning from SW and, as you can see, it can happen in the simplest of activities.

The relationship between silence and subordinating teaching to learning/ learner autonomy are very useful places to work. I think your description of preparing yourself before your peer teaching lesson is exactly what planning is in SW. The teacher has to get inside the language and see it through the eyes of the learner and start to plan from that understanding. This is such a useful place to work, I think. It almost sounds like developing a kind of empathy for the learner and the language. This kind of careful planning to details is, I agree, what allows the teacher to understand and anticipate what (if anything) is needed from the teacher in the moments of confusion that the learner faces. As you say it is about seeing how to shift responsibility to the learner and to push the teacher to think in a very detailed and specific way about how to set up challenges for this to occur.

Yes, I think this very connected to constructivist theory of learning. And, in fact, Gattegno leaves much of the SW to be constructed by followers for themselves. I think it is useful (and constructivist!) to be looking across courses and bodies of literature making these connections.

Thanks,
Leslie

Even though you may never use the charts, I will say:

The chart is often difficult at first. In fact, students think they have to memorize it but, Gattegno would argue that it is not about memorization. The teacher is putting sounds in circulation and then letting the students practice with the same sounds on the chart in various patterns until they begin to learn them. Students are used to being asked to memorize and so they bring that expectation of needing to memorize with them. Hopefully, after a few sessions, it becomes less about memorizing and more about being the moment associating and connecting.